The World of Foreign Books

ITALIAN BOOKS.

Surveyed by ARTHUR LIVINGSTON.

Italy's "Gettysburg speech."—Gentile and Fascismo.—The "Reform of Education."—Church and State.—Nationalism and Gentile's philosophy.—The Nation for its young men.

THE "Oath of the Fascisti," with its solemn consecration of the individual to the greatness, glory and welfare of his country, has made a deep impression on most Americans who have read it. Of this little document we dare prophesy that it will be among the few things of this age of transition to pass into the permanent literary patrimony of Italy. To the next generations of Italians it has a good chance of becoming what the "Gettysburg Speech" has been to us.

Now this mood of the "Oath," with its curious mixture of asceticism, mysticism and good old fashioned patriotism, has been compared by one critic with that of Savonarola's uprising. We personally might seek its remoter origins in more recent times—in the "New Nationalism" of Prezzolini and Papini, for instance (published in 1912, if we are not mistaken). But those, at any rate, who would somewhat intensify their "feel" of the exciting transformations that are going on in the turbulent Italian mind of the present can do no better than refer to some of the less technical writings of Giovanni Gentile—whether the "Reform of Education" (Harcourt), which Prof. Bigongiari has translated with such wholly admirable elegance and finish; or the "Discourses on Religion" (add "politics and morals"), which is still available only in Italian ("Discorsi di religione").

Gentile in the Ministry of Education.

It is pertinent to note that one of the first acts of the Mussolini Government was to elevate Gentile (who, by the way, is not a Fascista) to the post of Minister of Education—an appointment interesting in two ways. In the first place, it gives official recognition to the intellectual leadership of Italian youth, which Gentile has been more and more assuming in the last three years (a leadership Croce could not retain for reasons of temperament more than anything else—inability to sympathize with the budding virtuosity of young men, to laud, or even to encourage, anything that is not already full grown perfection). In the second place, it focusses attention on an important political problem affecting the internal cohesion of Fascismo, which on the one hand is in power with all the responsibilities of government (still sporting the Black Shirt, but eating many shirts of various other kinds); and, on the other, remains a political party in the field, free to use talk, bullets or castor oil in support of any of its whims or in vengeance of any of its disappointments. Gentile is a believer in the "free school." He would break down the State's monopoly of education and turn the latter over to private initiative—a policy which implies resumption by the church of a leading role in Italian education. Now large bodies of Fascisti have declared against any reform of the school system in this sense. What will Gentile do?

The Church and the Schools.

Fascismo is anti-Catholic only in so far as the church is an obstacle to the spiritual and political unity of the Italian nation. It is pro-Catholic (therefore anti-Masonic, even anti-Methodist), in so far as the church is the greatest of Italian institutions and the one surviving symbol of Rome's dominion over the world. A clever politician in the Ministry would have no difficulty in reducing such a paradox. He would leave the schools as they are and satisfy the anti-Clericals; he would preach Catholic idealism to his teachers and conciliate the pro-Clericals. But Gentile is not a politician. Indeed we may be sure that he takes his present honors only out of a sense of public duty and as an annoying distraction from more congenial pursuits. His salvation lies along a more natural route. Gentile, the leading Italian expert in pedagogy, is nevertheless a philosopher (we almost said a philosopher merely) who, in elaborating a theory of man's mental and spiritual nature, has in due course evolved a set of educational ideals. His theories he will continue to propound from the Ministry as formerly he propounded them from his cathedra in the University of Rome. He will be saved from drastic mistakes by the fact that he has little interest in and so far as we can see no knowledge of the practical problems of those who are interested in good schools rather than in a coherent system of pedagogy.

The Nationalist Catholic Paradox.

The fact remains that Gentile's influence with that portion of Italy's population which fought through the war and which now demands, in triumphant Fascismo, a controlling voice in the nation's policies, depends upon the feeling—perhaps upon the legend—that he has helped more than any one else to solve some of the fundamental problems of the country. The religious question is one of these. How be a self-respecting Italian and at the same time a self-respecting Christian (Catholic) if the church is at war with the State and a true patriot must accordingly be anti-clerical? How be a Christian also and an intelligent man if intelligence is uncompromisingly hostile to dogma? Gentile (in the "Discourses") holds that the State-Nation is the "universal form" of individual consciousness, where everything is subject to the collective will; to which will morals and religion are essential, along with "thought," without which, in turn, true morals and religion are impossible. Now the average Italian of the older generation solved his difficulties by a number of compromises: he would stay away from mass himself, but send his wife. He would baptize his children, but exclude priests from his home. As against Protestantism or atheism, he would pay lip service to Christianity, but decry public and private discussion of religious matters. All this amounts to a social conspiracy for mutual intolerance. Gentile's formula would recover liberty both for the Italian mind and the Italian conscience—each Italian wholly devoted to the nation, which must be the protector and upholder of spiritual (Catholic) ideals (incorporate them, in other words, in the school system), but on its own responsibility and independently of the church. We must, says he, repudiate "that insipid and empty spiritual neutrality in accordance with which the old Italy, which still is kicking though really dead, conceived of education—an education that is mechanical, amorphous, amoral, anti-spiritual; an education bewildered and bewildering because it destroys all healthy spiritual growth, as the amoral instrument of a State amorally constituted."

Gentile's Nationalism.

But where Gentile's teachings most closely harmonize with the spirit of the "Fascista oath" is in his concept of the State and the nation itself. Of this the most amazing expressions may be found in the "Reform of Education"—we say "amazing" because we doubt whether any thinker of Gentile's skill and subtlety ever carried the myth of nationality to greater extremes.

"The nation," says he "is as intimately pertinent and native to our own being as the State, considered as universal will, is one with our concrete and actual ethical personality. Italy . . . is that complex and lofty moral idea which we are realizing," realizing "in every instant of our lives, by our feelings and by our thoughts, by our speech and by our imagination. . . . It follows that not only must every man bear the imprint of his nationality but that also there is no true science, no man's science, which is not nation. . . ." Science "knows no personality which admits of being sequestered from its ideals, its ways of thinking and of feeling, from that greater life which is the nation. Concrete personality then is nationality, and therefore neither the school nor science possesses a learning which is not national."

Statements these which may mean much or little! They mean little to those peoples who have long since realized their aspirations for nationality and are free to devote their calmer thought to integrating the family of mankind. They mean much to those who have not attained full national growth and have still to create a State resting on a real consensus of its population.

Viewed in this characteristic phase, Gentile's philosophy suffers from a defect which an American pragmatist especially could not fail to notice: it is a product of the very nationalism of which it professes to furnish a theoretical justification. It is the defect which minimizes the value and appeal of much Italian philosophy from the early nineteenth century on. How difficult it is to find a page in Rosmini or Gioberti that does not show the coloring of local Italian problems! Without being, meanwhile, so very Italian after all! For we, who feel quite incompetent in such matters, should like to be shown why Gentile's actual idealism is not a revival, and a rather literal revival, of a German philosophy which, as every one had hoped, has been long since supplanted. What indeed is the inference that a plain man must draw from such a doctrine of the nationality of culture? Is it not that the particular ideas, tendencies, prejudices, habits of mind, of his particular country have a special sanctity that entitles them to his patriotic allegiance? And what is that but a rank provincialism, which Italians would be the last to tolerate in others?

Gentile's Mandate to Youth.

Fascismo, so far as it is a moral experience of the Italian nation, takes over bodily Gentile's concept of the State as a product of will, and accepts the mandate which he entrusts to the youth of the country to go out and make Italy. There is something even grandiose in the assumption, fundamental to Gentile's recent writing, that those young men who have risked everything, given evidences of untold devotion and sacrifices in the trenches of the Great War, may be relied upon to manifest a similar devotion and self-abnegation in the moral regeneration of the nation. It is not difficult to understand how the imagination of Italian ex-soldiers have been inflamed by such a trust, attaining in the war against "the enemy at home" an almost crusading fervor. But what kind of an Italy are these boys to make? An Italy that understands the relation of "subject" and "object" and will always be orthodox on the problem of knowledge? Or an Italy that has a sympathetic interest in the problems of peoples who live beyond her borders? Somehow we seem to feel an intolerable bookishness in the meditations of many of these Continentals of unquestioned genius—the lack of a human touch to which men like Royce, James, Robinson, Dewey, Montague have accustomed Americans. We wish Europe could find a way to produce fewer heroes and more men with some sense of what is going on in the great wide world!

Gentile's nationalism, for all its austere intellectual trappings, is sentimental, at bottom, and of a sentimentalism belonging to the middle of the last century rather than to our day. For the sentimentalism of the present—political and social sentimentalism, that is—has the world for its play: It deals with the "community of hope," rather than with the "community of memory." We are not so sure either that the soundest elements, or even some of the unsoundest, of Gentile's thought are as dependent on "idealism" as he imagines. His aversion to pedantry, his concept of a living culture, his notion of character, to refer to only a few of his more splendid paragraphs in the "Reform of Education," can just as well be grounded on realism as on idealism. And as for his nationalismic extravagances, we find them all shared by Turks, Afghans, and Moguls of to-day who never heard of Fichte. Of course, it is a philosopher's business to philosophize, just as it is a boxer's business to box. But there is a healthy tradition growing up even in philosophy that when a man has something to say he may say it right out without systematic complications designed principally to make it harder.

What has Croce gained, for instance, by mulling his glorious discoveries in esthetics in the morass of an effete German "idealism"?

Some 1923 Calendars

A CALENDAR—to some—is nothing more than an ornament, a decoration, or—well, just a calendar. Of course, the desk calendar is a business man's best friend. It is an invaluable aid to him in business, in the keeping of appointments, collection and payment of bills, when the rent is due, taxes and other important things to be kept at his finger tips. Here is a selection of calendars that may be to the home what desk calendars are to the office. The owners may model their daily life on calendar precepts, may find inspiration in the reading of one famous quotation a day.

"Poor Richard's Calendar," compiled by Robert S. Bartlett. Pages in green and red, one to each week, contains proverbs of Benjamin Franklin originally printed in "Poor Richard's Almanac" for 1733-1758.

"John Burroughs Nature Calendar," decorative, contains little nature tidbits taken from John Burroughs's work.

"The Kate Douglas Wiggin Motherhood Calendar" contains some very appropriate quotations on "mother" and "motherhood" selected from Kate Douglas Wiggin's works.

Two other calendars in this group are "*Life's* Society Calendar" and "*Life's* Vanity Calendar." These contain colored illustrations that were originally cover designs for *Life*. The calendars are published by George Sully & Co. of this city.